The curious Washington days of deposed Vegas Prince Bob Maheu

By Shelby Coffey III

His name still leaves some of the mighty in Washington—White House aide Bob Finch, presidential hopeful Ed Muskie, lawyer Tommy "The Cork" Corcoran, among others—a touch cautious or forgetful when strangers call to ask questions about their connections with Robert Aime Maheu.

To most of the rest of the public, Maheu was a nonentity until stories about Howard Hughes' "disappearance" began to hit the press last December. Maheu had been his top hired hand, the man who operated the vast (estimated $300 million) Hughes Nevada Operations, among other tasks. Quite suddenly that December Maheu was the man Hughes had fired, the man who was hinting that, not Hughes, but sinister forces within the Hughes organization had fired him. As far as the past went most of the stories listed Maheu simply as an "ex-FBI agent."

But Bob Maheu has long been considerably more than that. In the not-so-recent past, he was one of the fastest movers ever to sprint through Washington.

Maheu set up a private investigative firm that for years stalked Washington unchallenged, aiding great corporations and irate alimony-payers. He mixed with senators and well-placed security men around the Federal sector, as well as with Greek shipping giant Stavros Niarchos and Savile Row-tailored lawyers who garner $100 for nodding wisely exactly twice during an hour.

He aided Nixon forces during the "dump Nixon" drive in 1956.

When certain elements in the CIA decided to assassinate Fidel Castro, it was reportedly Bob Maheu they turned to for help in arranging for Mafia chieftains to find the would-be killer. (And Johnny Roselli, the West Coast mobster mentioned as the man who helped make arrangements during the assassination tries, later was reported to have retained an interest in a lucrative concession of one of the Hughes hotels during Maheu's stewardship.)

Bob Maheu was one of that curious sort who wander on the fringe of notoriety in Washington, known in special circles as a man who can sit with Presidents and millionaires, with *don Capos* and clandestine agents, with the minister's wife, the astronaut, the police lieutenant—with almost anybody and not be an embarrassment. That and the ex-FBI agent's shrewdness took him far but never totally away from this power center.

A grocer's son, Bob Maheu grew up in Waterville, Maine, wanting to be a lawyer. He graduated from Holy Cross College, but his Georgetown law school days were cut short. Maheu entered FBI agent classes just before World War II erupted.

After conducting some counter-spy operations that were not as grim as he makes them sound, he quit in 1947 to get rich in the booming postwar economy. But his subsequent attempt to corner the canned cream market squirted him into disaster. On the verge of bankruptcy, he went into government security work, winding up as assistant to the director of the Small Business Administration here.

In 1954, caught on the wrong side of a bureaucratic power struggle, Bob Maheu set up in business for himself.

He wangled some office space at 917 15th Street N W from Carmine Bellino, a friend of the Kennedy family, and opened Robert A. Maheu & Associates. Maheu now tends to refer to it as a management consultant firm. In fact, it was a private investigative firm and most of the Associates were, like the boss, former FBI agents. As it grew the firm became something of a halfway house for FBI agents leaving the Bureau. Though they muffed a few cases, Robert A. Maheu & Associates was the best such firm this city has seen in the past 30 years. During a recent conversation in Las Vegas, Maheu recalled that he "didn't get rich overnight, but I did very well overnight."

One of the first ways he "did very well" was handling a case for Stavros Niarchos, who wanted Bob Maheu to help undo a contract his sometime brother-in-law and jealous rival, Aristotle Onassis, had signed with Saudi Arabia. After months of tense international maneuvering, Bob Maheu did just that.

Niarchos was so impressed with Maheu's work on the matter (and amused by the low fee Maheu sought) that he put Maheu & Associates on a retainer of $25,000 a year for five years, as a bonus.

Coffey is an assistant editor of Potomac.

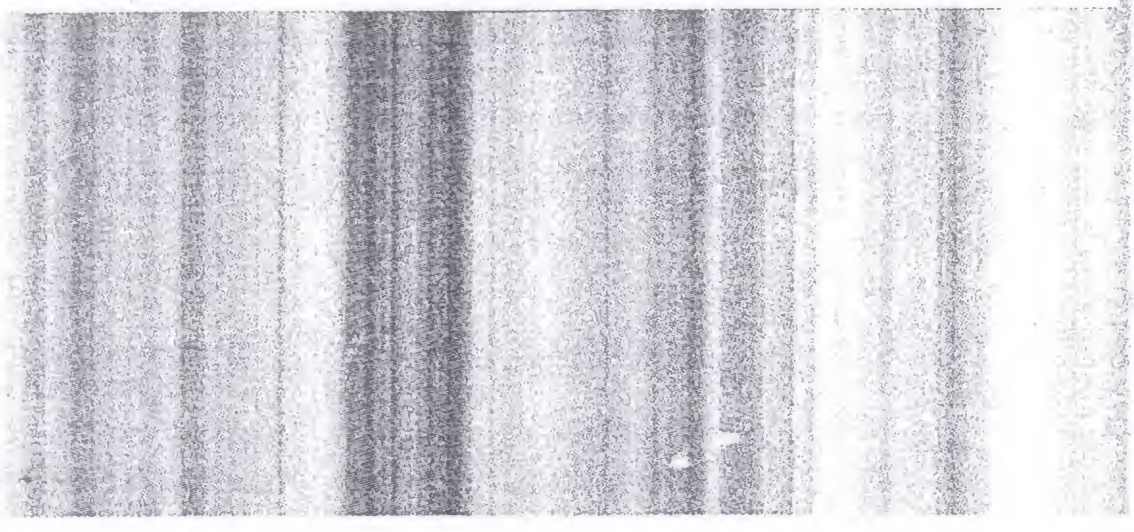
With that, the ascent began for Maheu. Often referred to as "charming" because of his interest in others, he made many friends in Washington, the kind of friends who can help with a favor later.

One former Maheu Associate recalls another early mission was tied to Howard Hughes. The associate says that the job involved surveillance of Stuart Cramer III, who at the time had recently married actress Jean Peters. The couple was living in Washington. She soon divorced Cramer and married Hughes. If one asks Maheu today if that was his first case for Hughes, Maheu replies: "You did say the first? To that, the answer is no."

In other "missions"—

- Maheu and Associates lined up stockholders in a bitter New York Central proxy fight.
- They aided the Senate Banking and Currency Committee when the senators dashed after the publicity in some housing scandals. (The senatorial association was flaunted.)
- An Associate rigged up a chair with an electronic eavesdropping device, then left it in the apartment of a Maheu client's ex-wife. With the information gathered by a listening device in an apartment down the hall, according to the client, they were able to reduce the alimony he paid.
- In the mid '50s Maheu also helped lawyer Edward Bennett Williams in the defense of Aldo Icardi, accused in a bizarre World War II murder.
- Maheu and several Associates sold approximately $60,000 worth of electronic equipment to the Dominican Republic regime of General Rafael Trujillo. "I thought it was all a sophisticated type of thing that would detect firearms brought in at the airport," says Maheu today. He is careful to add that since he was often out of town on assignments he didn't always know what his pack of ex-G-men might have been up or down to.
- In 1956 Harold Stassen was pumping to "Dump Nixon." Maheu & Associates oversaw a poll that countered a poll by Stassen that showed Richard Nixon to be a drag on the Republican ticket. Maheu's counterpoll, of course, showed Nixon to be a plus. It was mainly backed (though Maheu neglects to mention it) by William Loeb, the controversial New Hampshire publisher.

"I took on missions that most



George Magargel's neighbors were shocked when the news came from Danang of his arrest for murder.

from where the Cong was supposed to be. There, someone, maybe it was Sikorski, set up a Claymore mine and, running a trip flare to a nearby "hole," set it off, blowing the corpse's head off. Then they threw a few grenades to make it sound as though they were on a sweep of the area. In a day or two, regiment sent a very green lieutenant down to look into the incident. The ARVN's identification and the way and the whys he had died in the bushes near Hoi- Mit Village, in Thau Thien Province, already seemed to be overgrown, just another mistake buried in a jungle by the rain and the heat and everything.

For a month, the Vietnamese was carried on the books as killed in action. It was presumed he had come from a nearby ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam) encampment. But even his tentative identification as Nguyen Lanh was finally only an inference: ARVN missing, corpse found. Yet, if the dead man was anonymous, the three Marines of first squad, third platoon, Fox Company, Second Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment had nevertheless made a second, consequential mistake. Nguyen Lanh, it turned out, had been a pusher for another member of the platoon. He blew the whistle on the three, a move that coincided with a Marine Corps drive in Vietnam against the use of dope by its troops. Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the crime itself, it had been a drug matter and it was going to have hell investigated out of it.

In December, 1969, a month after the death, a very slick staff sergeant from a Criminal Investigation Detachment at Marine Division headquarters caught up with Fox Company and interviewed a dozen or so men, including "Mac" Magargel, "Ski" Sikorski and Stamats.

According to testimony at the subsequent trial, the sergeant plied young Magargel with two cans of ice cold Budweiser, the first cold beer, Mac told the sergeant, he'd had since arriving in Vietnam. Shortly after the interrogation began, testimony would show later, and apparently triggered by worry over the reactions of his mother and his wife, the young man became sick to his stomach. Fighting back the tears, he admitted his role in the killing of the pusher.

In January, Lance Corporal Michael Stamats, Pfc. Frederick Sikorski and Lance Corporal Magargel were each charged with premeditated murder, felony murder, conspiracy and robbery of "an unknown Vietnamese" male.

Mac Magargel is a nice looking kid, a sort of hard-eyed Tab Hunter, with the honed-down features of the typical overtrained Marine boot. Short haired, big shouldered, 5-foot-8 in a compact frame. He looks as though he'd have made a good high school football player, which is what he was going to be, maybe, until a backyard wall fell on him in Memphis, Tenn., when he was 15 and badly fractured an ankle, requiring the placement of a pin through a bone.

He had grown up in Silver Spring with his four sisters and mother, the son of a Secret Service agent who had died when George was 6.

As a youngster, George had been a good enough linebacker for the Green Meadows Boys Club in Greenbelt, Md., to be named his Little League's most valuable player. It was one of the big moments of his early life, of course.

He and his mother moved to Memphis in his early teens. After the accident, he became a letter-winner in swimming. He liked to hunt and fish. (In fact until Nov. 12, 1969, his only brush with the law had been at the age of 16, when he was caught fishing without a license in Mississippi.)

He returned for his senior year of high school to Silver Spring, to live with a married sister.

In 1965, on his return from Memphis, George began dating a Takoma Park girl named Judith Lackey. They went steady all through senior high school. He was apparently a model suitor. As his father-in-law wrote to counsel during the court martial in Danang, George always got Judy in on time, never drank, never smoked, never swore ("not even slang") around her parents, offered to mow the lawn, and—a real trial for a teen-ager—ingratiated himself with all nine of the Lackey grandchildren.

He was the kind of kid who had a paper route when he was young, screened the family porch, built a carport for the family home, hung curtains, earned his own date money, worked full time in a print shop during his last year in high school—without falling behind in his grades.

Brought up in an all-female family, he had noticeably asserted a deliberate sports-oriented manliness and he had acquired a few old-fashioned virtues like manners.

He was undoubtedly not quite so square as his endorsements make him out to be but there is sufficient evidence, backed by his defense attorney's own assessment on the trial scene, that he was a "very decent, very nice kid, maybe even a little young for his age but in a good, naive way."

Shortly before he graduated from Northwood High in the spring of 1968, he became engaged to his long-time girlfriend, Judith. But before giving Judy the ring he adhered to the quaint old custom of asking her father. William Lackey thought that the kids were a little young, but he liked the spirit and character of his prospective son-in-law. He especially was impressed by the fact that while completing his senior year George worked 40 hours a week in two different print shops, to earn extra money and to help out a friend who was starting his own business.

Judy and George were married in a Missionary Baptist Church Sept. 21, 1968, and enjoyed a few months together before he received a notice to take a pre-induction physical. In spite of his bad ankle, he passed. (A doctor had earlier told him he would be draft-proof.)

"I always thought that, of the four services, the Marines were far the best," he noted later. He dropped in to see the Marine recruiter at the Marlow Heights Shopping Center, and was told that the ankle injury would keep him out of the elite Corps. "I went to my doctor and told him the ankle didn't bother me anymore. He gave me a certificate saying that I was alright, and the Marines accepted me. Actually, it still does hurt me (even though the pin's out) when the weather's bad," he says. A few months passed before the induction process was completed and then

Continued on page 14

...APHED BY DAVID LEE WHITE

Robert Maheu's sometimes turbulent life in Las Vegas amid big cars, big houses and big names is a long way from the quiet lawyer's lifestyle he dreamed of as the son of a Maine grocer.

people would call impossible," says Maheu in his slow emphatic voice, hopeful, one suspects, that the phrase will catch.

• Once, during those balmy Associate days, he sent some of his men over to do a bugging test for Tommy (the Cork) Corcoran, the New Deal brain truster lawyer. The results were negative.

• Maheu entertained lavishly and well in a large home out in Sleepy Hollow in the Virginia suburbs. A gourmet who loves to cook, Maheu often had lobsters flown in fresh from Maine for dinner parties.

One party-goer recalls meeting Robert Finch at a Maheu party, though Finch now recalls meeting Maheu only at a couple of lunches after he had become then-Vice President Nixon's A.A. At the time Maheu had just gone partners with Robert King, Nixon's previous A.A., an ex-FBI man.

• Maheu served as a consultant to David McDonald when he was head of the United Steelworkers Union. "Bob is a goddamn great, fine and decent man," says McDonald today. Maheu helped during a strike and an election.

• Maheu and Associates also used their FBI-honed skills, according to several sources, for corporations such as Westinghouse, Panhandle Eastern gas pipeline, Continental Airlines, and Schenley's Corporation, whose owner contributed over $1 million to the J. Edgar Hoover Foundation.

By the early '60s Maheu was doing more work for Hughes, often flying from Washington to the West Coast, where he still represented Hughes' interests in many halls of power. Around 1962 he moved to a suburb of Los Angeles and operated on the second level of the Hughes empire.

"He isolated nerve centers and went after them," recalls friend Hal Marlowe, the (ex-FBI) former under-sheriff of Los Angeles County.

As might be expected, some enemies were also left behind. Lou Russell, an ex-Associate, remembers telling him, "You son of a bitch, you trade on friendship." Others remember Maheu as something of a blowhard who hinted at big connections that were often tenuous at best.

As for the surprisingly common talk that his Washington firm was at one time funded by the

Continued on page 12

LANE BRYANT
BUDGET FLOOR

soft jersey
swinger
5.99

Pretty print dress with soft shirring under a square yoke, one side seam pocket. Double-knit acetate in mainly blue, grey or brown.

special sizes
14½ to 32½
and 34 to 52

COME IN! PHONE! OR MAIL THIS HANDY ORDER COUPON TO:
LANE BRYANT

932 F St., N.W., Washington, D.C. Phone 347-1500

Please send me the item pictured:

SIZE ..... Color ..... 2nd Color Choice .....

NAME .....
(please print)

ADDRESS ..... APT. NO. .....

CITY ..... STATE ..... ZIP CODE .....

Charge ☐ Check ☐ Money Order ☐ C.O.D. ☐ (add 75c)
Mastercharge ☐ BankAmericard ☐ Card No. .....

UNDER $15 add 50c for delivery plus 75c C.O.D. Outside delivery area $1 postage

F8-11

Maheu, *from page 9*

CIA, Maheu says, "Not to my knowledge." Could it have been done without his direct knowledge? Cautiously, "I have no comment."

In 1966, in a stunning set of financial maneuvers, Howard Hughes began to buy into Las Vegas. Over all of the $300 million operation scowled the keen dark eye of Robert Aime Maheu, suddenly and enigmatically elevated to the caste of confidante, alter ego.

They made an odd pair, set in the neoned bowl of Nevada desert. On the one (and upper) hand, the soprano-voiced Texan, born to wealth, bold aviator turned gaunt recluse, business genius, the sort of man who boasted of deflowering scores of virgins but sired no known heirs.

On the other hand, the bass-voiced French-Canadian worker's son, growing up hungry in his own way, a gregarious man with the build of a tough middleweight and the elaborately courteous manners of the upwardly striving, at one time a near-bankrupt, a professedly devout Catholic, watchful father of four. In his later years Hughes shunned the sort of people Maheu had striven so hard to rub tailored elbows with.

For four years, the arrangement worked exquisitely. Maheu made a half-million dollars a year, lived in a mansion worth the same amount. (The mansion stirred much envy among other Hughes executives, claims Maheu. "They called it Little Caesar's Palace. At the time I thought it was very droll.") He was flown in Hughes' jets, chauffeured in Hughes' coupes, slumbered in Hughes' suites. When they were in Las Vegas, senators like Ed Muskie would drop in to say hello to the man who spoke for the billionaire. Whispers followed his entrance into plush restaurants when he returned to Washington for presidential inaugurations and other corporate games along the Potomac. For all this, he was on call 24 hours a day. Sometimes he had to leave guests like Joe DiMaggio (now a PR man for the Hughes Sports Network —that's where he went) to answer phone calls from his insomniac master, known in Las Vegas as "The Man."

In the autumn of 1970, The Man quit calling. In a wildly confused aftermath, Hughes seemed to have disappeared; Maheu made off with a truckload of corporate files ("To protect them"); rival Hughes Tool Co. chieftains Chester Davis and Bill Gay won court approval of Maheu's ouster. Maheu lashed back with a countersuit for $50 million in damages and settled down to the harsh legal chess game in a rented house. He didn't own a car to drive away from Little Caesar's Palace; these days he rents a white Lincoln Continental.

And when he executes a Classic One-Two Washington NAME Drop—such as: "How is Mayor Washington doing? I met him at the President's Prayer Breakfast"—you know that he says it without much hope of ever representing Howard Hughes in Richard Nixon's White House again.

At times, though, in the quiet of his new rented home, Robert Maheu seems a happy man. Standing behind the bar in his crimson-walled "miniature Silver Slipper" saloon, his gold-and-diamond "RM" cufflinks flashing spectacularly, he lets flow his attentive chitchat. Do you drink? How is your child? Your work? Time passes nicely with this man. No wonder that so many friends are so intensely loyal to him and his concern for their comparatively dull lives.

Only later, when wife Yve, curly and chic in a snakeskin dress, has come into the barroom does the mood curiously splinter. "I never thought I'd see the day when I'd taste *bitterness*," says Bob Maheu. "But I have."

"Yes," says his wife setting her drink down on the pink napkins with Bob and Yve written in gold across the bottom, "*Yes.*"

They begin slowly to ping-pong their outrage "bitter . . . hurt . . . innocent." The pace quickens; their anger fills the scarlet room. In the distance a watchdog howls in a yard of the wealthy neighborhood.

"You know what I can't understand," says Yve, "is that men who used to come up to me and kiss me on the cheek at parties, have turned against us. Now I want to say there, *there's the other cheek.* Hit it. . ."

"I am," says her husband, round face and bald head fully flushed, "Very BitTAH. . ." And the granite of working class Maine hardens his deep, hypnotic voice.

As abruptly as it began, the anger ends and they are once again an elegant, perfumed couple seated in their generation's, their class' idea of hermitage—a pretty barroom in a handsome house in a good neighborhood.

A few minutes later, driving to a small party across town they pass the mansion that Hughes built for them. Beneath the desert moon—an amber half-penny over the bleak hills—"Little Caesar's Palace" stands like a tragic house in the last of Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*—brooding, in padlocked splendor, the vast windows, black; the porch, vacant and moon-silvered.

"We never look back, we never look back," says the Mover. And already the Continental, sleek in its quiet power, has left the mansion and its gleaming alabaster porchlights behind. ■